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USU's Health Extension: Advocacy, Research, & Teaching (HEART) Initiative Completes Three Years of Impactful Programming


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USU's Health Extension: Advocacy, Research, & Teaching (HEART) Initiative Completes Three Years of Impactful Programming

Cover Page Footnote

We acknowledge our USU Extension colleagues, community members, and collaborators in creating large impacts and look forward to continued efforts moving forward.

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Abstract

USU's Health Extension: Advocacy, Research, & Teaching (HEART) Initiative addresses the opioid epidemic and other pressing public health issues in Utah. Data collected from HEART collaborations, acquired funding, and programming over the past three years demonstrates HEART's collective impact on the state's opioid epidemic.

Introduction

The rates of opioid overdoses experienced in the state of Utah have consistently been higher than the national average. In 2019, eight out of 10 adult overdose deaths each week were due to opioids, and half of those were specifically due to prescription opioids (Utah Department of Health [UDOH] Indicator-Based System for Public Health [IBIS], 2021). In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic created additional challenges, including increases in opioid-related deaths due to fentanyl. Deaths involving fentanyl more than doubled from 2019-2020 (Utah Drug Monitoring Initiative [Utah DMI], 2021). Yet, prescription opioids remained the biggest culprit in overdose deaths, at almost 40% in 2020 (Utah DMI, 2021). The detrimental impacts of the opioid epidemic require the prioritization and direction of resources to address challenges in each community.

In a report on opioid overdose hotspots in the state of Utah, UDOH reported that three HEART counties, including Carbon, Emery, and Weber counties, were "hotspots" with opioid overdose rates significantly higher than the state and national average between 2014-2016 (UDOH, 2019). The HEART initiative of USU Extension brings unique academic resources into the community, partnering locally and nationally to address the opioid epidemic and other pressing public health challenges in four main categories: (1) prevention and education, (2) stigma reduction and harm reduction, (3) strengthening communities ties, and (4) resilience building. These evidence-based strategies are consistent with national recommendations as well as local needs identified throughout the state of Utah (HEART Listening Session, 2018; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 2018).

Response

Through county- and state-level partnerships, HEART faculty have implemented a total of 66 activities statewide. These activities are numerous, including Opioid Education Dinners in "hot spots," Tooele Rural Opioid Healthcare Consortium, PROMoting School-community-university Partnerships to Enhance Resilience (PROSPER), Informing the National Narrative: Stories of Utah's Opioid Crisis, and additional community education programs and presentations.

The multidisciplinary Extension faculty team facilitated and expanded the reach of opioid prevention efforts throughout Utah. Within the first three years of the collaborative initiative, HEART faculty implemented a wide range of opioid prevention programming; educational events such as health fairs, trainings, and seminars; conferences and professional events attended and/or supported by HEART faculty; and professional presentations given (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: HEART Initiative 2018-2021 Programming Totals

148 One-Time Educational Events	77 Presentations Given
66 Opioid Programs Implemented	12 Quick-Tip Videos
125 Conferences and Professional Events	73 Newspaper Articles
916 Individuals Trained on Narcan Education	48 Peer-Reviewed Publications
1156 Naloxone Kits Distributed	124 Other Publications

Target Audience

Opioid Use Disorder (OUD) can directly and indirectly impact individuals, families, and communities. Therefore, HEART faculty work throughout the state, reaching community members from all socio-economic backgrounds with both face-to-face and virtual programming. HEART programming is shaped by community needs and evidence-based interventions. HEART has reached thousands of individuals statewide between the 66 programs and 293 presentations since the beginning of the HEART Initiative in 2018.

Outcomes and Impact

HEART Initiative impact data can be found at <https://extension.usu.edu/heart/impacts>. HEART faculty conducted harm reduction education and Naloxone training, resulting in the distribution of 1156 Naloxone kits over 916 individuals who were trained on its proper use, which resulted in over fifteen confirmed lives saved. Three days after a HEART training at a Substance Use Disorder (SUD) treatment center, a suspected opioid overdose of a patient was reversed by a participant, who then stated, *“I am not a worthless addict, I saved someone’s life this weekend”*. The participant used Narcan on an unresponsive patient at a party. A few days later, Counselors at the clinic spoke with HEART faculty about the patient and the changes they had noticed since the event. They stated that *“two lives were saved with Narcan that night. We were not sure the patient would make it through treatment...the patient’s attitude changed and they became engaged in treatment and believed they had value. We now have confidence that they will be successful. Thank you so much for the training.”*

HEART faculty brought in over \$8 million in internal and external funding through partnerships and faculty funding. This has allowed the HEART faculty to continue programming and further the initiative’s reach. Creating and disseminating evidence-based prevention information throughout community networks is key to HEART’s work. HEART has provided valuable information and resources by publishing a wide range of materials in the form of newspaper

articles and peer-reviewed publications, many of which have reached thousands of Utahns and individuals across the nation and world (i.e., downloaded over 3,000 times by educational, commercial, government, and organizational institutions, reaching over 66 countries via Digital Commons, and over 5,200 times from HEART's Research pages).

Additional state-wide efforts have included a monthly HEART Beat Newsletter with over 30 issues distributed to over 180 individuals. All issues are available on the HEART website at <https://extension.usu.edu/heart/news/>. Each issue is focused on local events and prevention information, monthly HEART Bunch video wellness series (over 12 quick-tip videos with information on various health and wellness topics), and three online quick courses to promote skill development and application. Collectively, these videos have gained over 2,022 views as of October 2021. A viewer emailed HEART faculty after watching a video with the subject line *WOW* and stated that they *"just wanted to thank you for the great YouTube video of each of your team teaching how to de-stress. It was a life saver this morning. That needs to [go] viral! Please thank your team."*

Along with these efforts, HEART faculty serve on many statewide and local coalitions to generate funding and other resources into the communities that need them most. For example, due to the leadership and funding provided by a HEART faculty member, a local coalition was developed in Carbon and Emery counties focusing on collaborative prevention efforts. Participants in HEART programming consistently report positive feedback. For example, at the community coalition level, one participant reported that the collaborative approach *"seems to be generating hope and direction for all our individual efforts."*

The HEART Initiative faculty have played an important role in providing targeted, evidence-based programming to address the opioid crisis. After HEART Initiative programming began, there was a reduction in the crude death rates in HEART counties (CDC, n.d.; UDOH, 2021). The reduction in overdose deaths might be a result of the collective efforts of key stakeholders in HEART communities. However, given the complexities of the opioid overdose crisis, it is difficult to attribute the reduction in opioid deaths to one specific program (HHS, 2018).

Public Value/Next steps

HEART will continue to connect, establish, and support local and state partners to provide education, support prevention efforts, provide evidence-based harm reduction skills, and promote and strengthen resilience through evidence-based practices. HEART serves as an example of how Extension can partner locally, state-wide, and nationally to address urgent public health issues. The HEART Initiative has seen great progress over three years (2018-2021) and is inviting more USU Extension faculty to increase collaborations and reach in 2022. The goal is to expand into more communities and establish partnerships throughout the state to continue to combat the opioid crisis in Utah. With targeted programming efforts that leverage USU Extension faculty expertise and programming along with community-based partnerships, we can reduce the lives lost to opioid overdose through improved prevention and education efforts (Atkintobi et al., 2018; Israel et al., 1998; Israel et al., 2001; Tremblay et al., 2018).

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